



Chapter 4

Reading Comprehension

The Reading Comprehension section, as you might suspect, consists of long, fairly complex passages, each accompanied by a series of questions about that passage. The passages span quite a range in subject matter, but typically there's one from each of the following areas: arts/humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and law. You do not need any prior knowledge of any of these areas to be able to answer the questions.

In this chapter, we will walk through the basics of taking apart Reading Comprehension passages and answering each type of Reading Comprehension question, with a special focus on the skills and techniques specific to the newer comparative question types.

WHAT IS READING COMPREHENSION?

“Reading Comprehension” sounds pretty straightforward, doesn’t it? But, this is the LSAT, so it isn’t quite as simple as it may seem. One way in which the test-writers make the section more challenging is how they construct the passage texts. Most of the time, the LSAT writers will take material from a book or journal and then adapt it to make it suitable for testing purposes. What does “adapt” mean? Because you’re not supposed to need outside information to be able to understand the passage, the test-writers must remove any material that would require a deeper understanding of the subject beyond the limits of the passage. On one hand, this is a great advantage. Everything you need to know in order to answer the questions is right there in the passage. On the other hand, when they make these edits, much of the transitional material that made the original text more readable is taken out as well. What you’re left with is often a pretty dense passage, chock full of details, with choppy or sometimes even nonexistent transitions from one subject to the next.

What’s on This Section?

The Reading Comprehension section contains four passages (three single passages and one set of dual passages). Each passage has five to eight questions attached to it, for a total of 26 to 28 questions. The passages are typically between 55 and 65 lines long.

Before we begin, take a moment to read the instructions to this section.

Directions: Each set of questions in this section is based on a single passage or a pair of passages. The questions are to be answered on the basis of what is **stated** or **implied** in the passage or pair of passages. For some questions, more than one of the choices could conceivably answer the question. However, you are to choose the **best** answer; that is, choose the response that most accurately and completely answers the question.

These are the directions that will appear on your LSAT. As usual on the LSAT, the official directions provide very little help. Review them now. They will not change. Don’t waste time reading them in the test room.

What Does This Section Test?

Reading Comprehension tests your ability to not only find details scattered throughout the passage, but also to answer questions about the logic of the author’s argument, or to apply new information given in the questions to what is already presented in the passage. And, because of the intense time pressure of the section, it also tests your ability to manage these tasks in the most efficient way possible.

Why Is This Section on the LSAT?

Reading Comprehension is on the LSAT to test your ability to read carefully and manage large amounts of information in a short period of time. This section also tests your ability to answer questions about a passage without bringing in any information from outside the passage.

READING COMPREHENSION: SECTION-WIDE STRATEGIES

First, let's go through the general strategies that will allow you to take control of the section as a whole. In the following portions of the chapter, we'll break down your step-by-step strategies for attacking each passage in the section.

It's Your Section: Prioritize

Choose Your Passages

The people who write this test are not your friends. Therefore, they may not give you the easiest passage first or the hardest passage last. Fortunately, you don't have to work the passages in the order that they appear. It is important to take a few seconds to assess the difficulty level of a passage before you dive in. Quickly read the first few sentences to get a sense of how tough the passage text will be, and glance over the questions. Abstract, theoretical language and ideas will make a passage hard to understand, while concrete and descriptive passages will be much easier to follow. Long question stems and answer choices, as well as questions that ask you to apply new information to the passage, will usually be much more challenging than short and straightforward questions. Don't overreact to unfamiliar topics; remember that all the information you need to answer the questions will be included right there in the passage text. Given that you're planning to apply to law school, a passage on some law-related theme might be of greater interest, but if it is written in a very abstract manner or about complicated legal theories, that doesn't necessarily mean that it will be easier to read and understand. Likewise, a science passage might not be familiar territory, but the language and ideas may be very direct and the questions themselves could be quite straightforward.

Some students also think that the number of questions a passage has should determine if and when they should attempt it. But if a really difficult passage has more questions, that doesn't mean that it will be any easier to get those questions right. In fact, you may end up sacrificing a lot of your time struggling through those questions, getting a high percentage of them wrong, causing you to miss out on an easier passage where you may be able to get all of those easier questions correct.

Here's What to Look for When You're Evaluating the Difficulty Level of a Passage

- **Level of language and ideas:** Passages that have clear, straightforward language and that have concrete, descriptive content will be easier to work than those that have abstract language and ideas.
- **Sentence structure:** Long, convoluted sentences don't bode well. Nor do long paragraphs, which probably contain multiple themes which will take some effort to separate from each other. Short, declarative sentences and shorter paragraphs will probably be easier to comprehend.
- **Questions and answer choices:** Scan the questions. Do you notice a lot of Reasoning questions? How long are the question stems and answer choices? Passages with long questions and lots of Reasoning questions will probably be more difficult to attack.

However, if two passages appear to be of equal difficulty, feel free to go for the one with more questions. All in all, if a passage looks especially formidable, nobody says that you have to do it now, or at all. Leave the hardest passage for last, or randomly guess on it and spend your time getting the other questions right.

Control Your Own Question Ordering

Just as you have control over which passages you do and when you do them, there is no need to complete the questions in the same order in which the test-writers happen to give them to you. Does the third question look especially formidable? Move past it and come back once you've worked the others on that passage. Are you having a horrible time deciding between two answer choices? Pick the one that looked right to you the first time, move on, and come back to that question one more time before going on to the next passage. You'd be amazed what a few minutes away from a question that's giving you trouble can do to clear your head. However, don't get bogged down on one question, reading it over and over. If you are really stuck, take your best shot and move on.

Your mantra: *I will remember that I am in control of the section. If a passage or question seems likely to be especially difficult, I will move past it. If a question frustrates me, I will work on a different one and return to it later with a fresh perspective. If I am still stuck, I will pick the most likely choice and move on.*

Take Control of the Passage: Read Actively

Reading Comprehension is probably the section of the test that feels the most familiar; you have been reading things and answering questions about those things for most of your life. However, doing well on LSAT Reading Comprehension requires reading in a way that is different from the way you handle material for school, work, personal enjoyment, or even for other standardized tests. Too many test-takers read the passage the first time through like a text book, scrutinizing every word and trying to remember all of the details. This approach uses up too much of your limited time. You gain points by correctly answering the questions, not by memorizing the passage. Going back to the passage to find details once you know that you need them to answer a question or to make a tough decision between two answer choices isn't wasted time; it's what Reading Comprehension is all about.

However, you do need to have a basic understanding of the author's argument in the passage in order to effectively address the questions. This involves knowing where key ideas are located, understanding the logical structure of the passage, and defining the purpose of the passage as a whole. Each passage has several big ideas, which will be illustrated or expanded upon. As you read, actively separate the core ideas, or claims, from the evidence used to support those claims. Focus your energy on identifying and understanding the claims, and leave the details for later (if and when they become necessary for answering the questions). The passage isn't going anywhere; if a question asks you for a detail that you skimmed

over, you can always go back to find it. If you feel yourself getting bogged down, don't read troublesome text multiple times. Instead, push forward and keep an eye out for something else that helps you understand the content or purpose of that confusing part of the passage. Most fundamentally, as you read, you should think about how the major claims relate to each other and how they finally add up to the main point and purpose, or bottom line, of the entire passage.

Many people find it useful to quickly preview the questions before reading the passage. This can help you decide which parts of the passage to read more carefully and which sections you can skim through more quickly.

Your mantra: *I will get through the passage efficiently, concentrating on the big ideas and logical structure, leaving the details for later.*

Select an Answer on Every Question

Each question will appear on screen individually. When you're confident you've found the credited response, select your answer and move to the next screen. If you aren't sure of an answer, be sure to flag the question so you can return to answer it later. If you don't think you'll have time to return to the question, POE as many choices as you can and select one from the remaining choices. Flag it so you can return if you have time and move on to the next screen.

Your mantra: *I will select an answer for every question and flag questions that I skip for the time being.*

Breathe

After you've completed each passage, take three deep breaths. You've cleared your mind, and you're ready to push on to the next passage.

Your mantra: *I will take time after each passage I complete to take some deep breaths.*

Here Are Your Reading Comprehension Mantras

I will remember that I am in control of the section. If a passage or question is difficult, I will move past it to work on a different one. I'll come back later with a fresh perspective. If I am still stuck, I will pick the most likely choice and move on.

I will get through the passage efficiently, concentrating on the big ideas and logical structure, leaving the details for later.

I will select an answer for every question and flag questions that I skip for the time being.

I will take time after each passage I complete to take some deep breaths.

**Pro Tip**

Previewing the questions before working the passage is an optional step, but it works very well for many students.

See the section on "Refining Your Skills" for some more guidance.

READING COMPREHENSION: A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS

The next several sections of this chapter will give you a four-step process for attacking each Reading Comprehension passage. First, let's run through an overview of the steps, and then we will break down each step in detail, with guided practice so that you can see what each part of the process looks like in practice.

Step 1: Prepare the Passage

Here are the basics of preparing a passage:

- A. Preview the questions, looking for lead words that tell you what parts of the passage will be especially relevant.
- B. Work the passage efficiently, focusing on the main claims made by the author.
- C. Annotate the passage, highlighting key words that relate to the question topics or that provide clues to the structure and tone of the author's argument, and making brief notes on scratch paper.
- D. Define the Bottom Line of the passage as a whole: the main point, purpose, and tone of the text.

Step 2: Assess the Question

Translate exactly what each question is asking you to do with or to the passage.

Step 3: Act

Just as some games questions require you to make new deductions before you attack the answers, or some arguments questions are best answered by first identifying or analyzing certain aspects of the paragraph, most reading comprehension questions are most accurately and efficiently attacked by doing some work with the passage text before looking at a single answer choice.

Step 4: Answer

Use a combination of your understanding of the question and of the relevant part or parts of the passage to use Process of Elimination on the answer choices.

This probably all sounds a bit abstract so far, so now let's break down each step in more concrete and practical terms.

Step 1: Prepare the Passage

Why?

You would never attempt the questions on an LSAT game without setting up the game, or try to answer an Arguments question without analyzing the argument first. The same applies to a Reading Comprehension passage. In your first read-through of the passage, you are laying the groundwork for the process of answering the questions. If you have little or no understanding of the passage text before you begin attacking the questions, your efficiency and accuracy will suffer. However, if you plod through the passage text, paying close attention to every single word, trying to understand and memorize every minor statement, you will be overwhelmed by the mass of information, not get what you really need out of the text, and take too much time away from the crucial process of actually answering the questions. Your goal is to spend 3–5 minutes on your first reading of the passage. Much more than that, and you won't have time to do the work you need to do while answering the questions.

Too many students fail to work on and refine their skills in working the passage and keep making the same kinds of mistakes on the questions without realizing that those mistakes track back to problems with how they worked the passage in the first place. Remember—yes, this is essentially an open-book test in that all the information you need is there in the passage. But, you wouldn't go into an open-book test in a class without having a good sense of how your materials and notes are organized and where you will be able to find the relevant information you need to answer the questions.

How: Principles of Active Reading

Find the Main Point of Each Paragraph As you read through each paragraph for the first time, focus on separating out the major claims made by the author from the evidence used to support those claims. It is those main claims that will tell you what the author is trying to communicate in each paragraph and through the passage as a whole. Much of the supportive evidence will be unnecessary for answering the questions, but if you need it, when you have read the passage actively and with focus, you will know where to find it.

Authors use words purposefully to help you to understand what they are writing. Yes, the LSAC writers often edit passage texts to make them difficult to follow and understand, but they leave in a lot of clues as well. Use those clues to your advantage, and you will give yourself an excellent foundation for attacking the questions.

Let's take a look at a sample paragraph.

The classic defining work of social choice theory is Ken Arrow's careful investigation of voting through a series of thought experiments. The result—Arrow's Impossibility Theorem—indicated that no method of conducting a majority decision vote can be guaranteed to conform to the basic requirements of democracy. A simple example illustrates Arrow's idea: For an electorate of three voters—1, 2, and 3—there are three candidates—A, B, and C. Voter 1 prefers A to B, and B to C; voter 2 prefers B to C and C to A; voter 3 prefers C to A and A to B. In such an electorate, a runoff between A and B declares A the winner; a runoff between B and C is won by B, and a runoff between A and C is won by C. Therefore, whichever candidate wins, that candidate is actually less preferable to the electorate than the candidate that was not involved in the runoff.

What is really important here, in terms of getting a basic understanding of the author's main point in this paragraph? (And, was that example really so simple?) The main claims are (1) that Arrow's work is central to social choice theory, (2) that he suggested that this method of voting elects a candidate that no one actually prefers, and (3) that Arrow believes this is non-democratic. So, what wording tells you what to pay attention to, and what to move through more quickly on your first reading of the passage? The first sentence gives you your first clue: "The classic defining work of social choice theory." Right there, the author is telling you: "This is important, pay attention!" The second sentence tells you what the result of Arrow's investigation was, which is why his work was so important. But then the author says: "A simple example..." which alerts you to the fact that what follows will just be further illustration of what you already know: that Arrow believes that "no method of conducting a majority decision vote can be guaranteed to conform to the basic requirements of democracy." So, skim thorough all those complicated details—if a question asks you about the mechanics of the whole thing, you know exactly where to find them. Notice one more key word: "Therefore." This conclusion indicator tells you "slow down again, here comes something else important." And, this is the final main claim in the passage; it tells you why Arrow believes that the results are undemocratic—the winner of the election is not the one preferred by the electorate.

So, what is the author's main point in this paragraph? "Arrow's work suggesting the non-democratic nature of majority-decision voting is central to social choice theory." That's really all you need to get out of this paragraph before you move on to the next.

Fit the Pieces Together and Find the Bottom Line So, you now know what this paragraph is all about, but what about the passage as a whole? Do you know at this point that the main point of this paragraph is the central point of the entire passage? Of course not; you have to see what the author says next, and how it relates to what you just read.

Imagine that the next paragraph begins, “However, recent research has called the basic premises of Social Choice Theory into question.” That word “However” and what follows tells you that now the passage may be going in a very different direction. As you read that next chunk of passage, then, go through the same process of finding the main claims and tracking the argument the author is making. Pay especially close attention to any words or phrases that indicate the author’s attitude or opinion. From the first paragraph, you know that the author thinks Arrow’s thought experiment was “careful,” and that those who believe in Social Choice Theory agree with Arrow’s results. Does that guarantee that the author agrees as well? Certainly not, and the beginning of this next paragraph indicates that the author may be about to describe some flaws in Arrow’s work or ideas. If you keep tracking those main claims through the passage, you will know what the author’s central point and purpose is: that is, the Bottom Line of the passage as a whole. That will give you an excellent basis on which to answer a variety of questions quickly and accurately, and as well to easily identify and avoid trap answers that misrepresent what the author has in fact claimed.

There are certain passage purposes that commonly appear on the LSAT, and being familiar with them can help you fit the pieces together as you read. So, as you read each paragraph and define the Bottom line, ask yourself if the author is doing one of the following.

Telling a Story These are the passages that sound least like arguments; the author is often simply relating a series of events with a neutral tone. The passage may, for example, describe the development of an artistic style, or the process involved in a scientific discovery, or the progression of a political movement. However, these passages are still made up of “moving parts,” each of which performs a particular function. Pay close attention to words that indicate a transition between one event or issue and another. When you are answering the questions, look out for wrong answers that misrepresent the sequence of events or that attribute an inappropriate tone to the author.

Comparing or Contrasting These passages often compare and/or contrast different theories or points of view. What distinguishes them from passages that defend, advocate, or criticize, is that the authors themselves do not take sides. In your annotation and analysis, pay close attention to the transitions between one side and the other, and to the differences or similarities described. When answering the questions, use your prep work to help you eliminate answers that describe the wrong position or side, or that mistake a similarity for a difference, or vice versa.

Defending or Advocating In these passages, the author will express a definitive point of view, either defending an idea or policy against its detractors, or making a recommendation about a particular point of view or course of action. As you work the passage, pay close attention to words that indicate the strength of the author’s argument and make sure to carefully distinguish the author’s position from any opposing positions that might be described. As you answer the questions, use this work to eliminate wrong answers that inaccurately describe the author’s tone (often by making it stronger or more extreme) or that confuse the author’s point of view with an opposing position.



The highlight and underline tools on the online test are most helpful on Reading Comprehension. Be sure to practice using these tools consistently!

Criticizing *Criticize* passages do just that; they say bad things about an idea, policy, or action. What distinguishes them from *Defend/Advocate* passages is that the author does not suggest or recommend an alternative. As you read and annotate the passage, pay close attention to exactly what is being criticized, and how strong the argument is (for example, is the author denouncing something, or rather just pointing out certain drawbacks). As you answer the questions, use your understanding of this logic to eliminate choices that describe supposed author recommendations that the author did not in fact make, answers that mix up what is and is not criticized, and choices that are inappropriate to the strength of the argument in the passage.

Highlight

A big part of active reading involves what your brain is doing as you read—mentally taking control over the material by focusing on what is important and avoiding getting caught up in the quicksand of potentially irrelevant or unnecessary details. Another part of active reading is using your online tools and pen to support your brain—mark up the passage in a way that helps you both to keep your focus and to find information you may need later as you answer the questions. There are two key forms of annotation you should be using:

- making concise notes indicating the main point of each paragraph and the Bottom Line of the passage as a whole on scratch paper
- highlighting or underlining logically important words and phrases

Let's take each of these and break them down further.

1. Notes

We have already talked about how to find the main points and identify the Bottom Line. It is a little too easy, however, to passively read through a passage and think “Yeah, got it” and only realize when you are done with the passage, or trying to answer the questions, that you really didn’t “get it” after all, and all you have in your brain are a bunch of disconnected words and ideas. So, make yourself write down at least a few words for each paragraph and for the Bottom Line. And a few words is enough; you are not outlining every little thing that happened in each paragraph, but simply putting those central ideas into a short sentence or phrase. Even if you never look at those notes again, they will have served their main purpose of making you define those core ideas. However, if you are having trouble finding information later on as you answer the questions, those notes will come in very handy, as you can use them to figure out where that information may be hiding.

2. Symbols

There are a few things that deserve extra emphasis: indications of the author's attitude or opinion, any topic sentences or thesis statements that express the main point of a paragraph or of the passage as a whole (keeping in mind that not every paragraph or passage will have one), and, if you are previewing the questions, locations of question topics. Pick a single color of highlighter to mark opinions, thesis statements, or questions topics. If you have previewed the questions, highlight a relevant word or two when you find those topics in the passage. Don't jump out of the passage and answer the question before reading the rest of the passage; by highlighting them, you make them easy to find once you do get to that question, however.

3. Underline text

Use the underline tool to mark text within the passage. Underlining should be limited to things that you have good reason to think are logically important to the author's central points. Here are the key things to underline and why.

A. Conclusion indicators

Words like "therefore," "thus," "hence," or "in conclusion" tell you "this is what all that stuff I was just telling you leads up to." That is, what follows conclusion indicators tend to be major claims that are important for the main points and Bottom Line.

B. Attitude indicators

Tracking and identifying the author's tone is crucial to understanding the author's real position (and to avoiding wrong answers that misrepresent it). Many passages are neutral in tone; the author is simply describing or analyzing something without offering any positive or negative judgment. But, if you see words like "unfortunately" or "sadly" or "thankfully" or "brilliantly," or any other word or phrase that indicates similar ideas, they deserve your close attention.

C. Changes in direction

Difficult passages often have twists and turns, and the questions on these passages will very purposefully test if you have been able to track them accurately. So, if you see words like "however," "but," "on the other hand," "yet," or "in contrast," underline them and think carefully about how what came before that word or phrase logically relates to what comes after, and how it connects to the author's argument as a whole.

4. Continuations

Often authors will make a series of connected points, and to answer the questions, you need to see that they are, in fact, connected and how. So, when you see words like "furthermore," "additionally," or "moreover," underline them and think about what larger point or claim all those segments of the author's argument relate to. And, when you are going back to the passage to find that part of the argument, use your annotations to make sure that you are taking into account all of the relevant parts of the author's argument.

5. Lists or sequence indicators

Often when answering the questions, you should know what came first, or last, or sooner, or later. Or, you may need to find a particular item on a list. Underline words like “first,” “next,” “before,” and “after” to help you answer those questions quickly and accurately.

6. Example or support indicators

We already discussed that examples and other kinds of support for larger claims are not particularly important to pay attention to the first time through a passage. But underlining words like “for example” or “because” or “since” has two functions. First, it reassures you that you can, in fact, find those details later on if you need them (and so helps you move through them more quickly in the moment) and second, it actually helps you find them later if you need them for the questions.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

So, let’s see how it works in practice. Work the passage on the following page as we have just discussed: define the main points and the Bottom Line and make thoughtful and concise annotations. Then turn the page and compare your work to the marked-up passage. That passage will not only have sample annotations, but also explanations of how you ideally should have read through the passage: what questions you should ask yourself as you read, and what deserves more or less attention in the text.

One of the most prolific authors of all time, Isaac Asimov was influential both in science fiction and in the popularization of science during the twentieth century, but he is also justly famous for the scope of his interests. Although the common claim that Asimov is the only author to have written a book in every category of the Dewey decimal system is untrue, its spirit provides an accurate picture of the man: a dedicated humanist who lauded the far-reaching power of reason. His most famous work, the *Foundation* trilogy, can be read as an illustration of Asimov's belief in reason and science, but even while he expressed that belief, science itself was calling it into question.

Foundation describes a time in which a vast empire spanning the galaxy is on the verge of collapse. Its inevitable doom is a consequence not of its size, but of the shortsightedness of its leaders. In this environment, a scientist named Hari Seldon devises an all-encompassing plan to help human civilization recover from the trauma of the empire's coming collapse. Using mathematics, Seldon is able to predict the future course of history for thousands of years, and he takes steps that are geared toward guiding that future in a beneficial direction. The trope of the benevolent and paternalistic scientist shaping existence from behind the scenes, present in much of Asimov's fiction, is never more explicit than in the *Foundation* series, which describes with an epic sweep the course and progress of the Seldon Plan.

As naïve and, perhaps, self-serving as the conceit of *Foundation* may seem to contemporary readers, it retains to some degree its ability to comfort by offering an antidote to the complex and unpredictable nature of experience. Science in Asimov's time was, in popular conceptions, engaged in just this pursuit: discerning immutable laws that operate beneath a surface appearance of contingency, inexplicability, and change. But even while Asimov wrote, science itself was changing. In physics, the study of matter at the subatomic level showed that indeterminacy was not a transitory difficulty to be overcome, but an essential physical principle. In biology, the sense of evolution as a steady progress toward better-adapted forms was being disturbed by proof of a past large-scale evolution taking place in brief explosions of frantic change. At the time of Asimov's death, even mathematics was gaining popular notice for its interest in chaos and inexplicability. Usually summarized in terms of the so-called "butterfly effect," chaos theory showed that perfect prediction could take place only on the basis of perfect information, which was by nature impossible to obtain. Science had dispensed with the very assumptions that motivated Asimov's idealization of it in the Seldon Plan. Indeed, it was possible to see chaos at work in *Foundation* itself: As sequels multiplied and began to be tied into narrative threads from Asimov's other novels, the urge to weave one grand narrative spawned myriad internal inconsistencies that were never resolved.

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Possible attitude toward IA

Disagreement with common claim

Back to positive

Key change in direction, and introduction of new theme

Description—Don't get bogged down in these details. Keep focus on purpose of author.

Question: "So is the passage likely to be all about the greatness of Asimov's work?"

Answer: "No—there is some inconsistency between Asimov's beliefs and the reality of science."

Main Point: "IA's work expressed a belief about science and reason that may not be true."

Question: "Why is the author giving me all of these details about IA's work and themes?"

Answer: "Given the end of P. 1, it's likely that the author will tell me later that they are unrealistic."

Main Point: "Theme of IA's work—scientists can help save society."

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Mildly negative wording, but then back to some positive

Crucial change in direction, and back to theme of end of P. 1

Thesis statement for paragraph

Examples of major claim just made—keep focus on purpose and how this relates to previous paragraphs, not details themselves

Thesis paragraph

Negative about an aspect of IA's work

Question: "So, what does the author really think about Asimov's work and relationship to science?"

Answer: "Science was evolving toward recognition of lack of control, which Asimov himself may have been realizing."

Main Point: *Changes in science in IA's time undermined assumptions of his work.*

Bottom Line of passage: *IA's main work expressed belief that science could be controlled for the good, but new scientific ideas in his own time cast doubt on that assumption.*

Steps 2 and 3: Assess and Act

Once you have prepared the passage, you are ready to assess the questions. Read each question **word for word** to understand exactly what that question is asking you to do. The LSAT writers are quite skilled at finding complicated ways to phrase what could have been a very straightforward question. Always take a moment to paraphrase the question before you take the next step.

Think of the question as setting out a task for you to accomplish. Identifying the question task allows you to define what the correct answer needs to do, and what you need to do with or to the passage, in order to find that correct answer as efficiently as possible.

If you can't identify the exact question type in the moment, don't panic; paraphrase the question and define for yourself what that question is asking you to do. However, most LSAT questions fall neatly into particular categories, and those categories are easy to learn and then apply. So, it is worth some work and time on your part to learn the types, keep the type and its logic clearly in mind as you are attacking the question, and then evaluate after having completed a passage or practice test if you did, in fact, correctly identify, translate, and address the question (and how you might have been able to do it even better).

Different types of questions require different kinds of actions on your part before you begin to evaluate the answer choices. So, it makes sense to talk about Assess and Act together for each of the question types.

LSAT Reading Comprehension questions fall into four basic categories. Here are those four categories, the question subtypes that fall under each, and the essential process to go through for each question type before you have read a single answer choice.

Big Picture Questions

Assess These questions require you to take the passage (or, in some cases for a Comparative Reading passage, both passages) as a whole into account.

There are three subtypes of Big Picture Questions.

- Main Point

These questions are often worded as follows:

Which of the following most accurately expresses the main point of the passage?

Which title best describes the contents of the passage?

- Primary Purpose

These questions are usually phrased as follows:

The primary purpose of the passage is to

In the passage, the author is primarily concerned with doing which of the following?

- Overall Attitude

These questions may be phrased as follows:

Which of the following most accurately describes the author's attitude in the passage?

The author's opinion regarding the ideas described in the passage can best be described as

Purpose and Attitude questions may also ask you about the author's purpose in, or opinion about, a more specific or limited part of the passage rather than about the passage as a whole. Make sure that you define the relevant scope of the question as part of translating the question task.

Act Think about the work you did to Prepare the passage. What was your last step of that part of the process? You defined the Bottom Line, based on the author's central point and overall purpose and attitude. Therefore, in most cases, you will not need to go back to the passage before you start evaluating the answer choices. However, you may well need to refer back to the text at some point before you make a final choice, especially if you are stuck between two answers. Remember that even on a Big Picture question, one word can be enough to invalidate an answer choice.

Extract Questions

Assess Extract questions are asking you to find and select the answer choice that is best supported by the information in (and only in) some particular part or parts of the passage.

There are two subtypes of Extract questions.

- Fact

These questions are often worded as follows:

According to the passage

The author states that

Which of the following is mentioned in the passage?

- Inference

These questions are phrased as some variation of the following:

It can most reasonably be inferred from the passage that

Which of the following is implied/suggested/assumed?

Which of the following conclusions is best supported by the passage?

With which of the following would the author be most likely to agree?

Which of the following can be most reasonably concluded from the passage?

As it is used in the passage, X refers most specifically to

Which of the following does the author appear to value most?

Tip:

If the question stem has no lead words referring to the passage, go back to the passage as you evaluate the answer choices.

Act The answers to *Extract: Fact* questions will tend to be close paraphrases of something stated in the passage. *Extract: Inference* questions will sometimes require you to do a bit more work; the correct answer will be directly supported by one or more statements in the passage, but may not be stated outright in the text.

However, the approach to any *Extract* question is the same. Don't rely only on your memory! Use the passage actively, and whenever possible, before you look at a single answer choice. The test-writers will give you plenty of wrong answers that "sound good" but that have something wrong with them that you will catch only if you go back to see exactly what the author actually said. If the question stem gives you lead words or directs you to a specific location in the passage, go back to the passage first and read at least 5 lines above and below that reference. Be sure to reread all of the relevant information. If the author's discussion of that topic begins earlier or continues longer (including situations in which the topic is discussed in more than one section of the passage), you will need to read more than those 10 or 11 lines. Once you have read and paraphrased the passage information, generate an answer in your own words (based on what the passage says), defining what the correct answer needs to do. Regardless of the exact form of the question, this is when previewing the questions and annotation really pays off; if you have already highlighted or underlined the relevant words in the passage, your task becomes much easier. Also, use your annotations that indicated key transitional points and claims equally actively. For example, if you have read 5 lines below, but the next sentence begins with a word like "however," keep reading. What comes after that shift is highly likely to be relevant to the question and to the correct answer.

Structure Questions

Assess There are two subtypes of Structure questions.

- Organization

Structure Organization questions ask you to describe the passage as a whole, piece by piece. These questions may be phrased as follows:

Which one of the following most accurately states the organization of the passage?

Occasionally, a Structure Organization question may ask you to describe the structure of a paragraph rather than the whole passage. As always, make sure to carefully define the scope of the question task.

- Function

Structure Function questions ask you to describe WHY the author made a particular statement or included a particular paragraph. That is, they are testing to see if you understood the logical function or purpose of some part of the larger whole of the author's argument. These questions will be phrased with some variation of the following:

The primary function of the second paragraph is to

The main function of the reference to X is to

The author mentions X in order to

Act For both versions of *Structure* questions, go back to the passage and use your annotation actively. Words like *therefore*, *for example*, *in contrast*, and so on tell you a lot about the purpose and function of that part of the passage.

Structure: Organization questions require you to describe the passage as a whole. They differ from *Big Picture* questions in that the correct choice will describe the logical structure of the passage step by step, rather than summarizing the content of the passage in a single statement. To answer these questions, break down each choice into pieces and check each piece against the passage. At this point, your preparation of the passage in defining the main point of each paragraph in succession will be especially useful, as the correct answer will follow the same progression.

Structure: Function questions have a more narrow focus. Because they ask you to define why the author included a particular paragraph or made a specific claim, go back to that part of the passage first. If it asks for the purpose of a paragraph, use your definition of the main point of that chunk, but also think about how it fits into the author's overall argument in the passage. If it asks for the purpose of a specific claim, go back to that part of the passage, read above and below the claim (just as you would for an Extract question), and paraphrase the claim being made. However, you have to take one more step before going to the answer choices: think not just about WHAT the author said but also WHY the author said it. That requires defining how that claim or statement relates to the rest of the paragraph and potentially to the passage as a whole.

Occasionally, Application questions will give you the new information in the question stem rather than in the answer choices.

In that case, define the theme of the new information and how it relates to the relevant part of the passage before evaluating the answer choices.

Application

Assess Most Application questions involve using new information, that is, information that is not already provided in the passage, and applying it to what the author of the passage has already argued or stated. The majority of Application questions will fit into one of two subtypes:

- Strengthen/Weaken

Strengthen questions may be phrased as follows, with the “X” in the sample question referring to a particular claim made in the passage:

Which of the following would most clearly support the author’s contention that “X”?

The author’s reasoning in support of her claim that “X” is justified would be most strengthened if which of the following were true?

Conversely, a Weaken question may be phrased something like this:

Which of the following, if true, would most undermine the author’s claim that “X”?

Whether or not the question explicitly tells you to take the answer choices as true or valid, do so. That is, the question is not asking you to figure out what is already true based on the passage. Rather, it is asking you to **assume each answer choice to be a true statement**, to figure out how each would or would not apply or relate to the passage, and to find the one that either **most** strengthens or **most** weakens the cited claim or argument made by the author. These are the only LSAT Reading Comprehension questions that will ask you to essentially change (for better or worse) the logic of the author’s argument, so it is especially crucial to understand the question task before taking your next steps.

- Analogy

Analogy questions may be phrased something like this:

Which of the following is most similar in its approach to the author’s approach as it is described in the passage?

Which of the following is most analogous to the situation described in the second paragraph?

Which of the following describes a relationship that is most logically similar to the relationship between X and Y described in the passage?

Analogy questions are similar to Strengthen/Weaken questions in that they give you new information in the answer choices. However, they are very different in that they ask you not to make the author’s argument better or worse, but rather to define the logic (not the topic or content) of the author’s argument, and to find the answer choice that is most similar in its theme or logic.

Act Even though Application questions involve working with new information, this does not mean that you should go right to the choices without going back to the passage first. Nor does it mean that the correct answer will go beyond the scope of the passage. Any credited response (unless it is an Except question) still has to be directly relevant to an issue raised in the passage. Therefore, it is still crucial to go back to the passage, find and paraphrase the relevant claim or relationship, and define for yourself what the correct answer needs to look like. For a Strengthen/Weaken question, that means knowing ahead of time what issue and direction (with or against the passage) the correct answer needs to include. For an Analogy question, that means defining what theme or logical relationship the correct answer needs to describe or portray.

Step 4: Answer

Basics

As you evaluate the answer choices for each question, here are some essentials to keep in mind.

1. Always read each choice word for word the first time. This is no time to waste all of the good work you have done up to this point by skimming through the answers and making snap decisions based on what “sounds good” or “sounds bad.” The test-writers will often write wrong answers in attractive ways, trying to distract you from the credited response. If you read the choices carelessly, you will fall for many of these traps.
2. Read all five choices before making a final decision. You are looking for the best answer, not the first one that sounds good.
3. Use Process of Elimination aggressively. Look for what is wrong with each choice, keeping in mind that one small part of the choice that doesn’t match the passage and/or the question task means the whole choice is bad.
4. Use the passage and your own answer actively (especially when the nature of the question has made it possible to generate an answer in your own words first). Correct answers on LSAT Reading Comprehension questions almost always have solid support in the passage. Use that to your advantage, and don’t assume that an answer that matches your expectations must be a trap!

Two Cuts

You will often find yourself going through the set of choices twice, eliminating the most obviously wrong choices the first time through, and then coming back to make a final decision between the two or three that you have left.

When you are down to two or three choices, don't panic and guess—this is a normal part of the process. Stay methodical, and go through the following final steps:

1. Reread the question stem, and make sure that you have correctly identified the question task.
2. Compare the remaining choices to each other, and identify relevant differences. That may be enough to alert you to the correct answer.
3. If not, go back to the passage one more time with the question task and the differences between the remaining choices in mind. Remember that you should still be using your main points, your Bottom Line, and your passage annotation actively to make sure that you are (1) going back to the correct section or sections of the text, and (2) correctly understanding what the relevant part of the passage is saying.
4. If you have eliminated four choices but aren't sure exactly why the remaining choice is correct, go ahead and pick it! That is the beauty of POE—if four choices are definitively wrong, you don't have to know exactly why the remaining choice is correct. And, while the correct answer may not exactly match what you were looking for, it will always be the one that has the least wrong with it.
5. If you have good support for one choice, but aren't sure exactly why one or more of the other four is wrong (and you have been through the process outlined above), go ahead and pick that well-supported answer and move on.

Attractive Distractors

These are common types of wrong answers that you will see over and over. The more familiar you are with how the test-writers often write wrong answers, the more quickly and accurately you will identify and eliminate them.

Wrong Part of the Passage Many of the wrong answer choices do contain content consistent with the passage. The problem is that this information is from a different part of the passage. For instance, if a passage is describing the properties of three different kinds of acids, and an Extract question asks about the properties of the second acid, many of the wrong choices will be properties of the first and third acids. As long as you focus on the information about the second acid only, you'll be able to eliminate any choices that talk about the first and third acids. Or, if a Structure Function question asks about the purpose of a particular statement, there will likely be a wrong answer that is about the purpose of some different statement made in the passage. Keep your focus on the purpose of the statement referenced in the question, and you will easily avoid the trap.

Extreme Language As we mentioned in the Arguments section, answer choices that make extreme claims or that use absolute wording often go beyond what can be supported by the passage. Because LSAT authors can have some strong opinions from time to time, however, you shouldn't simply eliminate choices with extreme language without checking that language against what was said in the passage. Think of extreme language as a red flag. When you see it, you should

automatically look back to the passage to see whether the passage supports such a strong statement. If it doesn't, and the question hasn't asked you to strengthen or weaken the passage, then you can eliminate the answer choice. This is a particularly common trap on Extract and Big Picture questions.

Too Narrow or Too Broad Main Idea and Primary Purpose questions often have wrong answers that are either too narrow or too broad. Remember that the main idea or primary purpose should encompass the entire passage but not more or less than that. You'll see many wrong answers that either mention something that was contained in only a part of the passage or was accomplished in only a single paragraph, or others that would include not only the main topic of the passage, but also much more beyond that (for instance, the passage discusses dolphins, but the answer choice talks about all marine mammals).

Partially Wrong This is a popular type of wrong answer on LSAT Reading Comprehension. Your goal is to seek out and eliminate answer choices that contain anything at all that might make them wrong. No matter how good a choice may start out, if you see anything amiss, you have to get rid of the answer. Very often, a single word may be the cause of the problem (for example, use of the word *not* to turn the answer into the opposite of the credited response). In addition, it's possible that the problem with the answer choice may show up late in the choice—the test-writers are hoping to lull test-takers into a false sense of security. For this reason, it is imperative that you read each answer choice thoroughly and carefully all the way to its end. Don't allow the good part of a choice to cause you to overlook or ignore the bad part—part wrong means all wrong no matter how good the good part might be.

Not Supported by the Passage You must be able to prove your answer with information from the passage. Any answer choice that can't be proven in this way can't be right, even if you know it to be true from outside knowledge of a subject. Don't invent a connection between an answer choice and the passage if you can't find one already present.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

So, let's see how it works in practice. Work the passage on the following page as we have just discussed: define the main points and the Bottom Line and make thoughtful and concise annotations. Then turn the page and compare your work to the marked-up passage. That passage will have not only sample annotations, but also explanations of how you ideally should have read through the passage: what questions you should ask yourself as you read, and what deserves more or less attention in the text.